

The beatitudes of peace

John Dear | Nov. 21, 2006 On the Road to Peace

Open your Bible to Matthew 5 and you will never be the same. Gandhi and King called those passages the grandest manifesto of non-violence ever written -- beginning with the storied Beatitudes. Grand for a number of reasons -- for their poignancy and conciseness, for their sheer poetics, for their morality and practicality. But grand, too, for a subtle reason -- for the furtive critique that lay behind them. Namely, every culture of war, such as the one Jesus lived and died in, fuels itself by an antithetical set of maxims. One might name them the "anti-beatitudes."

They are easily reconstructed, because, alas, they're all too familiar. We've been tutored in them all our lives; they hang in the air, live in our very bones. This false spirituality of violence, injustice and war is what Jesus spoke out against:

"Blessed are the rich, the reign of this world is ours."

Empirically the rich rule the world, and the rest suffer and die, often in misery. But Jesus counters with the real truth. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who have nothing -- no power, no prestige, no possessions, no success. They receive the first and greatest blessing -- entrance into God's reign. The rich lay claim to all things, except that. Thus Jesus calls us to live in friendship with the poor, to let go of power and domination, to embrace our own powerlessness. Which is to say, share our lives with the poor, practice downward mobility, and they'll share with us the reign of God.

Blessed are those who make others mourn.

This is the Pentagon's chief tenet. Those who kill, who support war, who pay taxes for killing, who build nuclear weapons, who execute people -- blessed are they, the Pentagon insists. More, blessed are you if you never mourn. But Jesus sets this anti-beatitude right. He says, blessed are the billions who mourn their loved ones lost to starvation, injustice, relievable disease, and war -- from Hiroshima and Vietnam to El Salvador and Iraq. God's consolation will flow to them. As for us, mourning leads to peacemaking. As we mourn with those who mourn, we receive God's consolation. Otherwise no comfort will be ours.

Blessed are the violent and the invincible, the proud and the powerful, the domineering and oppressive.

This is the motto of every warlike culture. But Jesus says the meek are blessed -- the gentle, the humble, the non-violent. The violent inherit nothing but blood and destruction. The meek, they inherit the earth. Pursuing non-violence wins the blessing of creation itself. As St. Francis discovered, creation and non-violence are inextricably linked.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for injustice.

The siren song of the System. The System sustains itself by all manner of injustice and lawlessness and greed. But Jesus offers a contrary word. Desire for unjust gain shall forever thwart fulfillment. The unjust will never be satisfied. But those who are passionate for justice, they'll find satisfaction, true meaning. They'll take part in

God's very purpose -- the transformation of disarmament and global peace.

Blessed are those who show no mercy.

So the culture summons us. No mercy to the poor, to women and children, the elderly and the homeless, victims, outcasts, enemies, refugees, the hungry, the undocumented, the unborn, those on death row, those who are different, those we don't like. But the culture keeps the spiritual consequence close to its vest: The merciless will be shown no mercy. On the other hand, says Jesus: God's mercy comes to the merciful.

Blessed are the impure of heart.

The warlike culture tells us that it does not matter if we are filled with darkness and confusion and violence. But such darkness, says Jesus, shades our view of God. It obscures our recognition of Christ in the poor, in the enemy, in one another.

Rather "Blessed are the pure in heart" -- those with disarmed hearts, non-violent hearts, hearts of universal love. To attain such wholehearted love, we must practice contemplative prayer, turn our violence over to God and receive in return God's gift of peace. Thus illumined by the light of God, we'll see God in the poor, in the struggle for justice, in the bread and the cup, in creation, in the poor, in the enemy. The pure in heart will see God. The beatific vision will begin here and now.

Blessed are the warmakers.

Thus say the Pentagon and its chaplains. No, says Jesus. "Blessed are the peacemakers" -- those who help end war and the conditions for war, who create peace. They are sons and daughters of the living God. Peace is God's purpose for humanity. God is a God of peace. Since we are God's children, we make peace, too.

The warlike culture tries to name us as patriots and warriors, as "good" Americans. It wants to tell us who we are. But Jesus tells us the truth: we are the beloved sons and daughters of the God of peace. That means, like Jesus, we act according to the God of peace, practice non-violence, resist war, demand that the troops come home from Iraq, and try to live and breathe the holy Spirit of peace.

Blessed are those who never stand up for justice, who do not rock the boat.

The silent, the indifferent, the comfortable, those who keep their distance. Blessed are you -- you've made it! You'll ruffle no feathers and invite no trouble -- but neither will you possess the reign of God.

The reign of God belongs to those "persecuted for the sake of justice." In a world where war and nuclear weapons run wild, peacemakers get no thanks, no honors. They're harassed, threatened, put under surveillance, arrested, jailed, even killed. But Jesus says, this is your opportunity to practice non-violence, to meet hatred with love -- just like the prophets and saints.

So Jesus declares: "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad for your reward will be great in heaven." Do we draw heat for our work against poverty, the death penalty, nuclear weapons, the war on Iraq? Take heart -- rejoice and be glad. We're on the right path. We are joining the ranks of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King, Dorothy Day, Archbishop Romero, and Sr. Ita Ford.

Recently, I learned that some scholars are rethinking the original Greek translation of the Beatitudes. The passive "Blessed are ?" is not accurate, they say. Better the more active phrase: "Walk on! Walk forth!" If true, it rings a different tone, a tone of doggedness, support, encouragement. God cheers us on that we might go the distance in pursuit of justice and peace. Something along these lines:

Walk forth, you poor in spirit, you humble and powerless. Keep going. Don't be discouraged by your poverty. The reign of God is yours.

Walk forth, you who mourn the victims of war and hunger. Keep going. You will be consoled.

Walk forth, you meek and gentle and non-violent. Inherit the earth and enjoy the blessing of creation.

Walk forth, you who hunger and thirst for justice. Don't give up. You will be satisfied. "Justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Walk forth, you merciful. Keep showing mercy in a merciless world. Forgive everyone. Be compassionate to everyone. Show mercy to everyone. Mercy will be yours.

Walk forth, you pure in heart. Keep going. Be filled with the light of peace and see Christ in the poor, in the enemy, in one another.

Walk forth, you who make peace. Keep on going. Speak against war. Organize peace vigils. Write Congress, demand the troops come home, work for nuclear disarmament. Become who you are, the sons and daughters of the God of peace.

Walk forth, you persecuted for justice. Keep going. Don't give up. You stand on the shoulders of Dr. King, Dorothy Day and Mahatma Gandhi. Your reward will be great.

Here are the Beatitudes of Peace, uttered contrary to the anti-beatitudes of war that pulse through the veins of our culture. If we follow these guideposts, hear this encouragement, and take that next step, we learn, the Gospel teaches, that the God of peace is alive and at work among us -- giving us God's reign, God's consolation, God's creation, God's satisfaction, God's mercy, God's face, God's calling us her daughters and sons, and God's best reward.

In other words, take heart. God is leading us into the fullness of life, a life of peace. There really is good news after all.

John Dear offered these reflections at the recent national "Call to Action" conference in Milwaukee. For an audiotape or videotape of his talk, contact: www.cta-usa.org [1]. For further reflections on the non-violence of Jesus, see his book, "Jesus the Rebel," (Rowman & Littlefield/Sheed & Ward). Also, please consider asking two or three friends to [sign up for e-mail notice](#) [2] of John's weekly NCR cafe column. And check out: www.fatherjohndear.org [3].

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